Meet the Comics Pages

Matt Janz
Cartoonist -- "Out of the Gene Pool"
Friday, July 27, 2007 1:00 PM

Join Washington Post Comics page editor **Suzanne Tobin** on **Friday, July 27 at 1 p.m. ET** for a discussion with "Out of the Gene Pool" cartoonist Matt Janz.

Suzanne Tobin: Welcome, comics fans to another edition of "Comics: Meet the Artist." Today our guest is Matt Janz, who is changing the name of his comic, effective Monday. Matt's "Out of the Gene Pool" is now going to be called "Single and Looking."

Matt is in sunny Chicago. Welcome, Matt, and thank you for joining us Live Online.

Matt Janz: hi suzanne ... it's great to be back on the online chat! great timing, too, to coincide with the big name change.

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single and looking?: I read that the name of your strip is changing. What's up with that?

Matt Janz: yes, after five years of "Out of the Gene Pool," I decided it was a good time to focus on the more popular characters. once I did that, the name "Out of the Gene Pool" just didn't seem to fit anymore.

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reston, va.: Hi Matt!! Thanks for starting my days off w/ a laugh. I saw that you're swapping the name of the strip. Why? And is it just a name-change, or will the strip be different?

Matt Janz: hi reston, va ...

the strip will not be much different from what you've been reading the past few months. I started "tweaking" OGP earlier this year so it would be a seamless transition once we changed the name.

Japan: Hey Matt,

Just wondering. Do you do your strip full-time or do you have a day-job?

Matt Janz: hey japan ...

I work on my strip full-time but I do have a side job 2 days a week that allows me a lavish lifestyle of running water and the occasional deep-dish pizza.

R Lington: Good luck on your strip's new direction. Whose idea was it to change, and who came up with the new title?

Matt Janz: hello, R ...

thanks! it was my decision to alter the premise and I also came up with the new title. the editors at my syndicate are slugs with zero imagination. hahaha

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Poolesville, Md.: How much input do you get from your editors, and what do they think of your change of focus?

Matt Janz: I do get a lot of input from my editors, both good and bad, which is [usually] very helpful.

... and all of them were very supportive of the name change.

Washington, D.C.: What gave you the idea for "Out of the Gene Pool"?

Matt Janz: I wanted a strip that was a snapshot of modern-day society, which explains the ensemble cast and the many side characters.

I also wanted to focus on a diverse cast, which is why I had characters like rufus and madame red, who were out of the ordinary.

it was originally called "critters," but that name was already trademarked.

Washington, DC: Hi Matt,

Love the Madam Red character in Out of the Gene Pool. Who is your inspiration for her (and have you 'fessed up to that person)?

Matt Janz: hello ...

madame red is the ONLY character that is actually based on somebody I know. she's based on a woman I used to work with who will remain nameless. she'd walk in with this big scowl and never had anything positive to say... whenever there wasn't a cigarette in her mouth!

... and I haven't told her for fear of a lawsuit!

Washington, D.C.: Slugs???

Next "iffy" strip gets spiked GENIUS.

Matt Janz: ah, someone else besides my editor thinks I'm a genius! woo-hooo!

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slugs?: I assume by "slugs," you meant brilliant and stunningly beautiful.

Matt Janz: no. I mean slugs. literally.

Washington: So, does this mean that your married characters get dumped? We losing undershirt man for good? It's gonna be all about Jackie and whatsizname? The loser?

Matt Janz: not all of the married characters get dumped. madame red is married, although I've never shown her husband. jackie and sam will be more prominent but I still love to write gags for travis, zoogie and red. rufus, I'm afraid, has moved on.

... but never say never, right?

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edgewater, md: Who's your favorite character in the strip? I had always thought it was Rufus, but now I don't see him anymore.

Matt Janz: ah, rufus was my favorite, and still is. he was the "everyman." I enjoy all of my characters but I especially like to write for and draw madame red. I don't put her in the strip too often so it's like a holiday for me when I do.

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popularity: Who determines the most popular characters or is it done by a scientific poll?

Matt Janz: as far as my strip, I can tell who the more popular characters are from reader e-mails I receive (janz@salcomic.com), the feedback I get from my gorgeous editors and syndicate sales staff and comments from friends and family.

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washington, dc: why does jackie always change her hair?

Matt Janz: I like to keep the strip fresh. when I originally created jackie, I purposely gave her the distinctive facial features so readers would still recognize her with a different 'do. plus, I just like to add that dimension to her character. I also try to draw her in different outfits, which is tough for an "old navy" guy like myself.

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washington DC: Hey, Matt. Gene Weingarten here.

Please explain your teddy bear. Epistemologically and philosophically. Why do you have one nonhuman character whom no one seems to notice is nonhuman? Do it in 100 words or less. Thanks.

Matt Janz: hey gene ...

because I can. that's 3 words.

now, why haven't you given my strip top honors in your column recently? the only answer I'll accept is "because I cannot recognize your genius."

Gene "ius": Has Gene Weingarten ever picked your strip for Comic Pick of the Week? If so, were you honored or humbled?

Matt Janz: see previous answer!

he's mentioned me a few times, both good and bad.

I was just disappointed that a mention in his column does not pay anything.

Harrisburg, Pa.: When did you begin drawing cartoons? Did you do cartoons for your high school newspaper? What drew your attention to creating cartoons?

Matt Janz: I started drawing cartoons when I was 8. I received a big box of "peanuts" books and that was it.

I did illustrations for my high school paper but kept the actual cartoons to my own notebooks, which were never filled with actual notes.

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washington, dc: What is your favorite thing about drawing a comic strip? Do you draw one strip a day, or a bunch all at once?

Matt Janz: my favorite thing about cartooning is knowing I've made someone laugh, whether it's via a reader e-mail or my editor writing "clap clap clap clap" after she reads my strips.

I try to keep it to two strips a day at the most. any more than that and it becomes a chore. I submit 7 strips each week, which is nicer than a month at a time. during my first year, I remember I had to produce 13 strips over a 3-day period. not fun.

Vienna: Now that you're focusing more on the trials and tribulations of the single life, will Jackie's son Travis also be discovering girls?

Matt Janz: mmmm. good question. I think travis is still more interested in money at this point. but you never know.

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washington, d.c.: Any chance Sam and Jackie will end up together?

Matt Janz: absolutely NOT. as I've told other readers who have asked this question, I'm not about to have a "ross and rachael" situation in my strip. bleah.

Philadelphia, Pa.: If you were not a cartoonist, what else might you have done as a career, indeed, perhaps you still may do?

Matt Janz: hey PA ...

If I wasn't cartooning, I'd probably be designing web sites.

graphic design always came easy to me.

I wouldn't be an accountant, that's for sure.

Adams Morgan: I'm sure this is an obvious question... but why are you changing the name of your comic strip? Does that happen often in the comic strip world?

Matt Janz: hi AM ...

I can think of two other instances of name-changing in the comics: "ernie" and "robotman."

Shady Side: Chicago, eh? So is that where your comic strip characters live? I don't get an urban vibe from your work.

Matt Janz: whatsup, shady ...

nope. my characters live in suburban middletown. I grew up in the 'burbs.

Occoquan: With this new focus, will Travis continue his entrepreneurial tendencies? Perhaps start his own online dating Web site?

Matt Janz: absolutely. I still like to write about non-dating topics.

Washington, D.C.: Matt, I wonder if you have considered using aspects of Karisue Wyson's life as a basis for your strip? Mo

Matt Janz: I don't think I could print most of that stuff in newspapers!

wild, wild girl.

Weingarten: You have not gotten top honors because you have not drawn Jackie naked, and sent it to me. You have to PETITION for top honors, my man.

Trudeau is forever mailing me naked pictures of Boopsie. Trudeau gets top honors FREQUENTLY.

Matt Janz: noted. send me your address.

Andy girl: Any chance you could show her with VPL (visible panty lines)?

not GW

Matt Janz: check out the old "liberty meadows" strips for VPLs.

my editors would slug me if I tried that.

Single and Looking: Where do you get your dating material? Are YOU single and looking?

Matt Janz: I was single for a long time and have lots of friends that were/are single.

... but, ironically, not single anymore.

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annapolis, md: I love how you change names of things and mangle words. "Ubercrombie" has to be my all time favorite. But I also like the plays on words with Madam Red as Dear Kitty. Please don't say Red is going away, too!

Matt Janz: thanks! Ubercrombie is one of my favorites too.

... and red isn't going anywhere!

Alexandria VA: Question: What the heck is Zoogie? A wombat? Koala? Does he have an Aussie accent?

Comment: I hope the change to the strip doesn't mean more Jackie. I find her shallow, self-obsessed character to be absolutely infuriating maybe because she reminds me of some neglectful mothers in my neighborhood

Matt Janz: my answer is that zoogie is whatever you want him to be. when I created him, I based him on the cutest thing I could find: a koala.

newspaper editors would comment that my characters were too ugly (rufus) so I thought it would be funny to have an adorable character ... that was a real $@#@$^%!

Madame Red: I like Madame Red too -- why don't you put her in the strip more??

Matt Janz: I try not to put her in too much. a daily dose of a cranky, irritable chain smoker is not a good thing for the comics pages. plus, I think it makes readers happy to see her.

Washington: You're trying to skew younger, right? Admit it. Explain the change in a mea culpa sort of way. What were you doing wrong? What are you trying to fix?

Matt Janz: mmmm... not necessarily younger. OGP attracted plenty of younger readers. I've always thought that OGP was a quality strip that had a lot to offer and changing the name will hopefully appeal to even more readers.

I did misjudge the appeal rufus would have on readers (and editors). people just didn't take to him like I thought they would. back in 2002, I thought he'd eventually be on TIME magazine ... or at least DIRTY UNDERSHIRT WEEKLY.

Mt. Pleasant: Do you read other comic strips? Which ones are your favorites?

Matt Janz: yes, I read the comics.

"pearls before swine" is one that makes me laugh on a regular basis. good stuff.

Baltimore: How come you draw all your characters with huge gaping mouths? This always reminds me of a basking shark.

Matt Janz: hahahaha.

this isn't the first time I've heard this. my best guess is because my characters always talk, and jackie does have a big mouth. madame red is always yelling which makes a huge, gaping mouth necessary.

IJOCA, VA: Matt,

Do you draw with a pen, or do you do the strip on the computer?

Matt Janz: hi IJOCA ...

I create my strips at the drawing board in pencil, brush, pen and ink ... then I scan them into my computer and add color and graytones. I think I'll always draw my strip on paper.

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online only, please: Dear Kitty,

I work with a guy who thinks he's a genius. Whenever I give him great ideas, he rejects them by saying you can't improve on genius, or he swipes them for his own.

How do I handle this pain-in-the-you-know-what?

Signed,

Gene Weingarten's editor

Matt Janz: simple answer. you simply come to terms with the fact that you might be a little out of touch with contemporary humor, granny.

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woodley park zoo: When is Allison McDermitt going to make another appearance? I love her!

Matt Janz: hey zoo ...

she's become a nice side character. she just made an appearance so probably not for a while. plus, if I draw her too much, my editor saturates samples to newspapers with all of her storylines, which makes it seem like I'm drawing a strip about a bitter singer.

Harrisburg, Pa.: Will we ever see Madame Red's husband? If so, what is he going to look like (or, even if

we're not going to see him, how should we imagine him?)

Matt Janz: nope. herbert will remain behind closed doors. I think, years ago, I did draw the top of his head peeking up from a couch.

he looks like gene weingarten. ick.

IJOCA, VA: Was this the first strip you've done? How long did it take you to get a contract?

Matt Janz: no. I created several comic strips before I received a contract from the WPWG. I submitted my first strip when I was 10 years old and got my OGP contract when I was 30.

I tried self-syndicating for several years in my 20s.

Matt Janz: thanks so much, suzanne! this was a lot of fun!

I have to go draw a nude pic of jackie for gene.

so long!

Suzanne Tobin: Thanks, Matt, for taking the time to play nice with our readers (not to mention Gene Weingarten). We wish you continued success--and not just because you're with The Washington Post Writers Group (although that doesn't hurt).

Thanks to all our readers who sent in questions. I hope you'll join us next month for another edition of "Comics: Meet the Artist."

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